

THE BROTHERS

BY STACY AUMONIER

IN the twilight of his mind there stirred the dim realization of pain. He could not account for this nor for his lack of desire to thrust the pain back. It was, moreover, mellowed by the alluring embraces of an enveloping darkness, a darkness which he idly desired to pierce, and yet which soothed him with its caliginous touch. Some subconscious voice, too, kept repeating that it was ridiculous, that he really had control, that the darkness was due to the fact that it was night, and that he was in his own bed. In the room across the passage his mother was sleeping peacefully. And yet the pain, which he could not account for, seemed to press him down and to rack his lower limbs. There was a soothing interval of utter darkness and forgetfulness, and then the little waves of febrile consciousness began to lap the shores of distant dreams, and visions of half-forgotten episodes became clear and pregnant.

He remembered standing by the French window in their own dining-room, his mother's dining-room, rapping his knuckles gently on the panes.

Beneath the window was the circular bed of hollyhocks just beginning to flower, and below the terrace the great avenue of elms nodding lazily in the sun. He could hear the coffee-urn on its brass tripod humming comfortably behind him while he waited for his mother to come down to breakfast. He was alone, and the newspaper in his hand was shaking. War! He could not grasp the significance of the mad news that lay trembling on the sheets. His mother entered the room, and as he hurried across to kiss her he noted the pallor of her cheeks.

They sat down, and she poured him out his coffee as she had done ever since he could remember. Then, fixing her dark eyes on his and toying restlessly with the beads upon her breast, she said:

'It's true, then, Robin?'

He nodded and his eyes wandered to the disfiguring newspaper. He felt as though he were in some way responsible for the intrusion of the world calamity into the sanctity of his mother's life; he muttered:

'It's a dreadful business, mother.'

His gaze wandered again out of the window between the row of elms. Geddes, the steward, was walking briskly, followed by two colliers. Beyond the slope was a hay-cart lumbering slowly in the direction of the farm. 'Parsons is rather late with the clover,' he thought. He felt a desire to look at things in little bits, the large things seemed overpowering, insupportable. Above all, his mother must not suffer. It was dreadful that anyone should suffer, but most of all his mother. He must devote himself to protecting her against the waves of foreboding that were already evident on her face. But what could he say? He knew what was uppermost in her mind — Giles! He had no illusions. He knew that his mother adored his elder brother more passionately than she did himself. It was only natural. He too adored Giles. Everybody did. Giles was his hero, his god. Ever since he could remember, Giles had epitomized to him everything splendid, brave, and chivalrous. He was so glorious to look at, so strong, so manly. The vision of that morning merged into other visions of the sunlit hours with Giles — his pride when quite a little boy if Giles would play with him; his pride when he saw Giles in flannels going in to bat at cricket; the terror in his heart when one day he saw Giles thrown from a horse, and then the passionate tears of love and thankfulness when he saw him rise and run laughing after the beast. He remembered that when Giles went away to school his mother found him crying, and told him he must not be sentimental. But he could not help it. He used to visualize the daily life of Giles and write to him long letters which his brother seldom answered. Of course he did not expect Giles to answer, he would have no time. He was one of the most popular boys at school and a champion at every sport.

Then the vision of that morning when the newspaper brought its disturbing news vanished with the memory of his mother standing by his side, her arm round his waist, as they gazed together across a field of nodding corn. . . .

Troubled visions then, of Giles returning post-haste from Oxford, of himself in the village talking to everyone he met about 'the dreadful business,' speaking to the people on the farm, and to old Joe Walters the wheelwright, whose voice he could remember saying:

'Ay, tha' woan't tak' thee, Master Robin.'

He remembered talking to Mr. Meads at the general shop, and to the Reverend Quirk, whose precise voice he could almost hear declaiming:

'I presume your brother will apply for a commission.'

He had wandered then up on to the downs and tried to think about 'the dreadful business' in a detached way, but it made him tremble. He listened to the bees droning on the heather, and saw the smoke from the hamlet over by Wodehurst trailing peacefully to the sky. 'The dreadful business' seemed incredible.

It was some days later that he met his friend Jerry Lawson wandering up there with a terrier at his heels. Lawson was a sculptor, a queer chap, whom most people thought a fanatic. Jerry blazed down on him:

'This is hell, Robin. Hell let loose. It could have been avoided. It's a trade war. At the back of it all is business, business, business. And millions of boys will be sacrificed for commercial purposes. Our policy is just as much at fault as — theirs. Look what we did at —.'

For an hour he listened to the diatribe of Lawson, tremulously silent. He had nothing to reply. He detested

politics and the subtleties of diplomacy. He had left school early owing to an illness which had affected his heart. He had spent his life upon these downs and among his books. He could not adjust the gentle impulses of his being to the violent demands of that foreboding hour. When Lawson had departed, he had sat there a long time. Was Lawson right?

He wandered home determining that he would read more history, more political economy; he would get to the root of 'this dreadful business.'

He wanted to talk to Giles, to find out what he really thought, but the radiant god seemed unapproachable; or rode roughshod over the metaphysical doubts of his brother, and laughed. Giles had no misgivings. His conscience was dynamically secure. Besides, there was 'the mater.'

'When I go, Rob, you must do all you can to buck the mater up.' He had looked so splendid when he said that, with his keen, strong face, alert and vibrant, Robin had not had it in his heart to answer. And then had come lonely days, reading new books and occasionally talking with Lawson. When Giles went off to his training he spent more time with his mother, but they did not discuss the dreadful thing which had come into their lives. His mother became restlessly busy, making strange garments, knitting, attending violently to the demands of the household. Sometimes in the evening he would read to her, and they would sit trying to hide from each other the sound of the rain pattering on the leaves outside. He had not dared talk to her of the misgivings in his heart or of his arguments with Lawson. . . .

And then a vision came of a certain day in October. The wind was blowing the rain in fitful gusts from the sea. He was in a sullen perverse mood. Watching his mother's face that morning, a

sudden fact concerning her had come home to him. It had aged, aged during those three months, and the gray hair on that distinguished head had turned almost white. He felt within him a surging conflict of opposing forces. The hour of climacteric had arrived. He must see it once and for all clearly and unalterably. He had put on his mackintosh then and gone out into the rain. He walked up to the long wall by Gray's farm, where on a fine day he could see the sea; but not to-day, it was too wet and misty, but he could be conscious of it, and feel its breath beating on his temples.

He stood there, then, for several hours, under the protection of the wall, listening to the wind and to the gulls who went shrieking before it. He could not remember where he had wandered to after that, except that for some time he was leaning on a rock, watching the waves crashing over the point at Youlton Bay. And then in the evening he had written to Lawson.

'I want to see this thing in its biggest, broadest sense, dear Jerry.'

He knew he had commenced the letter in this way, for it was a phrase he had repeated to himself at intervals.

'Like you, I hate war and the thought of war. But, good heaven! need I say that? Everyone must hate war, I suppose. I agree with you that human life is sacred. . . . But would it be sacred if it stood still?—if it were stagnant?—if it were just a mass affair? It is only sacred because it is an expression of spiritual evolution. It must change, go on, lead somewhere. . . .

'Don't you think that we on this island have as great a right to fight for what we represent as any other nation? With all our faults and poses and hypocrisies, have n't we subscribed something to the commonweal of humanity?—something of honor, and justice, and equity? I don't believe

you will deny all this. But even if you did, and even if I agreed with you, I still should not be convinced that it was not right to fight. As I walked up by the chalk-pit near Gueldestone Head, and saw the stone-gray cottages at Lulton nestling in the hollow of the downs, and smelled the dear salt dampness of it all, and felt the lovely tenderness of the evening light, I thought of Giles, and what he represents, and of my mother, and what she represents, and of all the people I know and love with all their faults, and I made up my mind that I would fight for it in any case, in the same way that I would fight for a woman I loved, even if I knew she were a harlot. . . .

Lying there in his bed these ebullient thoughts reacted on him. Drowsiness stole over his limbs, and he felt his heart vibrating oddly. There seemed to be a sound of drums beating a tattoo, of a train rumbling along an embankment. And in fancy he was on his way to London again with the memory of his mother's eyes as she had said:

'Come back safely, Robin boy.'

The memory of that day was terrifying indeed. He was wandering about a vast building near Whitehall, tremulously asking questions, wretchedly conscious that people looked at him and laughed. And then that long queue of waiting men. Some were so dirty, so obscene, and he felt that most of them were sniggering at him. A sergeant spoke sharply, and he shuddered and spilled some ink on one of the many forms he had to fill up. Everyone seemed rough and violent. After many hours of waiting he was shown into another room and told to strip. He sat on a form with a row of other men, feeling incredibly naked and very much ashamed. The window was open and his teeth chattered with the cold and the nervous tension of the desperate experience. A doctor spoke kindly

to him, and an old major at a table asked him one or two questions. He was dismissed and waited interminably in another room. At last an orderly entered and called his name among some others, and handed him a card. He was rejected.

He returned to Wodehurst that evening shivering, and in a mood of melancholy dejection. He was an outcast among his fellows, a being with a great instinct towards expression, but without the power to back it up. The whole thing appeared so utterly unheroic, almost sordid. He wondered about Giles. If presenting one's self at a recruiting office was such a terrifying ordeal, what must the actual life of a soldier be? Of course Giles was different, but — the monotony, the cheerlessness of barrack life! And then the worse things beyond!

After that he would devour the papers and tramp feverishly on the downs; he tried to obtain work at a munition factory and was refused, made himself ill sewing bandages and doing chaotic odd jobs. And all the time he thought of Giles, Giles, Giles. What Giles was doing, how Giles was looking, whether he was unhappy, and whether they spoke to him brusquely, like the sergeant had to himself in London.

Then came the vision of the day when Giles came and bade farewell, on his way to France — a terrible day. He could not bring himself to look into his mother's eyes. He felt that if he did so he would be a trespasser peering into the forbidden sanctuary of a holy place. He hovered around her and murmured little banalities about Giles's kit, the train he was to catch, the parcel he was to remember to pick up in London. When it came to parting time, he left those two alone and fled out to the trap that was to take his brother to the station. He had waited there till Giles

came, running and laughing and waving his hand. He drove with him to the station, and dared not look back to see his mother standing by the window. They were silent till the trap had passed a mile beyond the village; then Giles had laughed, and talked, and rallied him on his gloomy face.

'I'll soon be back, old man. Buck the mater up, won't you? Whoa! Tommy, what are you shying at? . . . By Jove! won't it be grand on the sea to-night!'

Oh, Giles! Giles! was there ever any-one so splendid, so radiant, so uncrushable? His heart went out to his brother at that moment, and he could not answer.

So closely were his own sympathies interwoven with the feelings of his brother, that he hardly noticed the moment of actual separation on the platform. His heart was with Giles all the way up to London, then in the train again, and upon the sea with him that night.

In his imagination, quickened by a close study of all the literature he could get hold of on the actual conditions out there, he followed his brother through every phase of his new life. He was with him at the base, in rest camps, and in dugouts, and more especially was he with him in those zigzagging trenches smelling of dampness and decay. On dark nights he would hear the scuttle of rats dashing through the wet holes. He would hear the shriek of shells, and the tearing and ripping of the earth. He would start up and try to make his way through the slime of a battered trench which always seemed to be crumbling, crumbling. In his nostrils would hang the penetrating smell of gases that had the quality of imparting terror. So vivid were his impressions of these things that he could not detach his own sufferings from that of his brother. There were times when he be-

came convinced that either he or Giles was a chimera. One of them did not exist. . . . He seemed to stand for an eternity peering through a slit in a mud wall and gazing at another mud wall, and feeling the penetrating ooze of dying vegetation creeping into his body. Above his head would loom dark poles and barbarous entanglements. It was as though everything had vanished from the world but symbols of fear and cruelty, which rioted insanely against the heavens; as though everything that man had ever learned had been forgotten and destroyed; and he growled there in the wet earth, flaunting the feral passions of his remote ancestry. And the cold!—the cold was terrible. . . . He remembered a strange thing happening at that time. During some vague respite from the recurring horror of these imaginings, he had, he believed, been walking out through the meadows, when a numbness seemed to creep over his lower limbs. He could not get back. He had lain helpless in a field when George Carter, one of the farm hands, had found him and helped him home. He had been very ill then, and his mother had sent for Doctor Ewing. He could not remember exactly what the doctor said or what treatment he prescribed, or how long he had lain there in a semi-conscious state, but he vividly remembered hearing the doctor say one day: 'It's very curious, madam. I was, as you know, out at the front for some time with the Red Cross, and this boy has a fever quite peculiar to the men at the front. Has he been out standing in the wet mud?' He could not remember what his mother answered. He wanted to say: 'No, no, it's not I. It's Giles,' but he had not the strength, and afterwards wondered whether it were an illusion.

He knew that many weeks went by, and still they would not let him walk.

That was his greatest trouble, for walking helped him. When he could walk, he could sometimes live in a happier world of make-believe, but in bed the epic tragedy unfolded itself in every livid detail, intensely real.

Long periods of time went by, and still he was not allowed to leave his room. His mother would come and sit with him and read him Giles's letters. They were wonderful letters, full of amusing stories of 'rags,' and tales of splendid feeds obtained under difficult circumstances. Of the conditions that existed so vividly in Robin's mind there was not one word. To read Giles's letters one would imagine that he was away on a holiday with a party of young undergraduates, having the time of their lives. But the letters had no reality to him. *He knew. He had seen it all.*

Time became an unrecognizable factor. Faces came and went. His mother was always there, and there appeared another kind face whom he believed to be a nurse; and sometimes Jerry Lawson would come and sit by the bed, and talk to him about the beauties of the quattrocento and other things he had forgotten, things which belonged to a dead world. . . .

Lying there in bed he could not detach these impressions very clearly, nor determine how long ago they had taken place. There appeared to be an unaccountable shifting of the folds of darkness, a slipping away of vital purposes, and a necessity for focusing upon some immediate development. This necessity seemed, somehow, emphasized by the overpowering pain that had begun to rack his limbs, more especially his right foot. He wanted to call out, but some voice told him that it would be useless. The night was too impenetrable and heavy, his voice would only die away against its inky pall. There was besides a certain soothing tenderness about it, as though it were caress-

ing him and telling him that he must wait in patience and all would be well. He knew now that he was sleeping in the open, and that would account for the chilling coldness. At the same time it was not exactly the open. There were walls about and jagged profiles, but apparently no roof or distances. The ground was hard like concrete. He must be infinitely patient and pray for the dawn. . . . He began to feel the dawn before he saw it. It came like the caressing sigh of a woman as she wakes and thinks of her lover in some foreign clime. Somewhere at hand a bird was twittering, aware too of the coming miracle. Almost imperceptibly things began to form themselves. He was certainly behind a wall, but there was a door, with the upper part leaning in. A phrase occurred to his mind: 'The white arm of dawn is creeping over the door.' A lovely passage! he had read it in some Irish book. The angle at the top of the door was like a bent elbow. It was very, very like the white arm — of some Irish queen, perhaps, or of the Mother of men — a white arm creeping over the door, and in its whiteness delicately touching the eyelids of the sleeping inmates, while a voice in a soft cadence whispered: 'Awake! pull back the door, and let me show you the silver splendors of the unborn day!'

A heavy dew was falling and the cold seemed bitter, while all around he became aware of the slow unfolding of desolation; except for the leaning door, nothing seemed to take a recognizable shape, everything was jagged and violent in its form and exuded the cloying odors of death. Somewhere faintly he thought he heard the sound of a cornet, bizarre and fantastic, and having no connection with the utter stillness of this place of sorrow.

His eye searched the broken darkness in fugitive pursuit of a solution of the formless void. Quite near him, ap-

parently, was an oblong board which amid this wilderness of destruction seemed to have escaped untouched. As the dim violet light began to reveal certain definite concrete things, he became aware that on the board were some Roman letters. He looked at them for some time unseeingly. The word written there stamped itself without meaning on his brain. The word was *Filles*. He repeated it to himself over and over again. The earth seemed to rock again with a sullen vibrating passion, as though irritated that the work of destruction was not entirely complete. Things already destroyed seemed to be subjected to further transmutation of formlessness. But still the board remained intact, and he fixed his eyes on it. It imbued him with a strange sense of tranquillity. *Filles!* A little word, but it became to him a link to cosmic things. The desire to reason passed, as the ability to suffer passed. Across the mists of time he seemed to hear the laughter of children. He could almost see them pass. There were Jeannette and Marie, with long black pig-tails and check frocks, and just behind them, struggling with a heavy satchel, little fair-haired Babette. How they laughed, those children! and yet he could not determine whether their laughter came from the years that had passed or from the years that were to come. But wherever the laughter came from, it seemed the only thing the powers of darkness could not destroy. He lay then for a long time, conscious of a peace greater than any he could have conceived. And the white arm of dawn crept over the door.

The crowd who habitually came down by the afternoon train trickled out of the station and vanished. The master of Wodehurst came limping through the doorway. His face was bronzed and perhaps a little thinner,

but his eyes laughed, and his voice rang out to the steward waiting in the dogcart:

'Hullo! Sam, how are you?'

He was leaning on two sticks, and a porter followed with his trunks.

'Can I help you up, sir?'

'No, it's all right, old man; I can manage.'

He pulled himself up and laughed because he hit his knee upon the mudguard.

'It's good to be home, Sam.'

'Yes; I expect your mother will be glad, sir,' answered Geddes, touching up the horse. 'And so will we all, I'm thinking.'

They clattered down the road, and the high spirits of the wounded warrior rose. He asked a thousand questions, and insisted on taking the reins before they had gone far. It was dusk when they began to draw near Wodehurst; a sudden silence had fallen on Giles. The steward realized the reason. He coughed uncomfortably. They were passing within a hundred yards of Wodehurst Church. Suddenly he said in his deep burr:

'We were all very sorry, sir, about Master Robin.'

The eyes of the soldier softened; he murmured:

'Poor old chap!'

'I feel I ought to tell you, sir. It was a very queer thing. But one day that young Mr. Lawson — you know, the sculptor — about a week after it all happened, he must have got up at day-break, I should say — nobody saw him do it. He must have gone down there to the churchyard with his tools, and — what do you think? He carved something on the stone — on Mr. Robin's stone.'

Giles said quickly: 'Carved! What?'

'He carved just under the name and date, "He died for England."'

"He died for England!" He carved

that on Robin's grave! What did he mean?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Really! What a rum chap he must be!'

'We did n't know what to do about it, sir. I saw it and I did n't like to tell your mother, and nobody likes to interfere with a tombstone, it seems profane-like. So there it is to this day.'

'Thank you, Sam. I'll think about it.'

'Have you had much pain with your foot, sir?'

Giles laughed, and flicked the horse.

'Oh, nothing to write home about, Sam. I had a touch of fever, you know. I did n't tell the mater. It was later on that I got this smash of my right foot. It happened at —, I've forgotten the name; some damned little village on the Flemish border. I was lucky in a way, the shrapnel missed me. It was falling stonework that biffed up my foot. There was a building, a sort of school I should think. It got blown to smithereens. It was rather a nasty mess-up. I was there for seven hours before they found me —. Hullo! I see the mater standing at the gate.'

The horse nearly bolted with the violence of Giles's waving arms. . . .

The dinner — all the dishes that Giles specially loved — was finished. With his arm around his mother's waist and a cigar in the corner of his mouth, he led her into the warm comfort of the white-paneled drawing-room.

'You won't mind my smoking in here to-night, mater?'

'My dear boy!'

The Reveille

They sat in silence, watching the red glow of the log fire. Suddenly Giles said:

'I say, mater, do you know, an awfully rum thing Geddes told me?'

His mother looked up.

'I think perhaps I know. Do you mean the — cemetery?'

Giles nodded, puffing at his cigar in little nervous inhalations.

'Yes. I knew. I saw it, of course. I've sat and wondered.'

'Such a rum thing to do! What do you think we ought to do about it, mater?'

He saw his mother lean forward; the waves of silver hair seemed to enshrine the beautiful lines of her drawn face, her voice came whispering:

'Had n't we better leave it, Giles? . . . Perhaps he really did die for England?'

The young man glanced at her quickly. He saw her aged and broken by the war. He thought of his brother. . . . Then he caught sight of his own face in the mirror, lean, youthful, vigorous. The old tag flashed through his mind:

'They also serve who only stand and wait.'

He thrust away that emotional expression, and in the manner of his kind stayed silent, rigid, with his back to the fire. And suddenly he said:

'I say, mater, won't you play me something? Chopin, or one of those Russian Johnnies you play so rippingly?'

